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CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

BY

DAVID RAFFELOCK

Associate Editor of The Author & Journalist

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I THE PLACE OF TECHNIQUE.....	9
II THE IMPORTANCE OF SITUATION	16
III STORY SOURCES	25
IV DETERMINING THE ANGLE.....	30
V THE USE OF HUMAN INTEREST.....	43
VI SYNTHETIC CHARACTERIZATON ..	51
VII FIXING THE BASIS OF ACTION.....	63
VIII THE FINAL PUNCH.....	74
IX WRITING THE STORY.....	81

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY
TECHNIQUE

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

CHAPTER I

THE PLACE OF TECHNIQUE

MOST persons, aiming to develop what they regard as their talent for writing, eagerly scan every book or course on the subject of fiction-writing that they can find ; or, if blessed with a friend who is selling his output, they go to him for advice.

It is only natural that one should wish to feel his way, in order to avoid wasting time and energy, by learning what others have done who have achieved success, so that he may perhaps do likewise. In creating fiction, as in life, the common impulse is to conform to customary modes.

But if a writer possess originality must he still write according to generally followed methods? Is conformity an inexorable law in fiction-writing?

It would seem so, for are not rapid action, suspense, plot and other devices regarded indispensable for the short-story, especially by most editors, instructors and successful fictionists? Yet another side presents itself ; there are capable authors who will not conform to the established rules but whose stories are nevertheless highly rated by discriminating critics.

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

Instructors in short-story writing often find themselves in a quandary when, after apparently convincing their students regarding certain requisites, such as the absolute necessity of plot, etc., a querulous pupil triumphantly proclaims, "But I read a story in a magazine that hadn't any plot at all. If the story was no good, why did the editor buy it? And anyway, I thought it was very interesting; it seemed to me to be the best in the issue."

"Ah," responds the instructor, somewhat at bay, "exceptions only prove the rule. Genius can rise above what the mediocre must follow."

But why *must* the average writer follow? Perhaps the professor will try to show how much better the author in question would have done had he followed the general method and supplied a plot for his story.

After some such discussion by the professor, the thoughtful student may still be perplexed; he finds other "exceptions" in magazines. In fact such publications as *The Dial*, *Little Review*, *Broom*, and others are full of them. If such stories are being written and printed, sometimes even paid for at high rates, why should not he write them too? This is a question to which the beginning writer deserves a serious answer.

The teaching of technique may give the impression that the acquirement of it is necessary to make one a writer, and it predicates a dogmatic belief in a *certain* technique. But it is my conviction that the writer should learn not only the opinions of those who insist upon the value of a strict technique, but also the views of such as maintain that fiction is being robbed of originality and beauty by too rigid observance of form.

THE PLACE OF TECHNIQUE

From this conflict of opinion must arise the writer's greatest help—the habit of thinking. One person may convince you that technical form is necessary; another could very likely show the opposite to be true. Both are right and both are wrong; even the balance between the two may be false.

Determine what ability you have; learn whether you are able to write only stories technically devised; whether you prefer and are best able to write stories that flow naturally from the sincerity of your feeling, regardless of form; or whether the latter kind, when guided by a definite technical form, proves to be the best kind of story you can write. Whatever you determine proves the truth for you, and it is inexorable—for you!

Having determined to some degree the ability he possesses, one still has another question to decide: is he to train his talent for the production of a highly marketable variety, or shall he work to give expression to the sincerity of his feeling and for the development of his ability to full bloom, regardless of the market demand?

Jack London, David Graham Phillips and William Sidney Porter (O. Henry) used their extraordinary talents to write popular fiction that sold readily; other capable authors have preferred comparative obscurity and poverty rather than deliberately write anything that pandered to a popular taste.

I cannot entirely agree with those who decry the popular interest in learning to write stories for which there is today such a great market demand. If one has purely commercial interests, there is no reason why

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

he should not try to prepare himself for the magazine-fiction business; but if one has any ability that fits him for more than mere mechanical concoction of plots, it seems a sacrilege for him to restrict his talent to rigidly conforming to popular or superficial ideas for the sake of earning larger pay for his work. The ideal of money-making in fiction-writing has been overemphasized so that now many writers sneer at the literary artist who fails to get his stories published in magazines of great circulation. Consider financial returns from your writing, of course, but on the other hand regard the satisfaction of trying to write stories that will outlast a day because of the beauty and sincerity and truthfulness you may be able to give to them, disregarding immediate marketability. Life has deeper meaning when one has tried to realize fully his intellectual capacity.

Whatever kind of writing you have the ability for and decide to do, take advantage of every opportunity to develop yourself as far as possible. Technique has been presented in these first pages as a matter of less than supreme importance, and yet this is a book of short-story technique. Technical knowledge is valuable. It is the mold into which one's ideas and visions of life may be poured and is as necessary as the technique of music is to the musician. It is only when it becomes purely mechanical and a certain form is dogmatically followed that technique seriously hampers the author's expression of his ability. Art must be plastic; rigid forms are for the artisan. Technical devices are simply tools and are never essential to good writing, although the author of popular plot stories

THE PLACE OF TECHNIQUE

may find them of surpassing value in constructing his fiction.

Technique is of added importance to the author if he is fully aware of the part it plays and knows definitely its function. Nietzsche has propounded the great philosophy of conscious evolution for the human race. Through conscious development, he believed, it would be possible to produce a race of supermen. It has been found true that the broadening of an individual's consciousness is productive of great personal development, regardless of whether the theory as applied to the race be true or not. The writer profits in a twofold way by a greater consciousness — both personally and in his work. Nelson Antrim Crawford, writing of Keats, said that the great English poet wrote so masterfully because he was highly conscious of the technique of his medium and of his employment of it.

In the following chapters it is my purpose to make the reader aware of certain important technical elements that are of value to the writer of plot stories and of plotless as well. It is not the intention of the present writer to argue dogmatically the value of any one phase of technique, but to assist the reader in choosing what is best for himself.

No discussion is included in this book of plot, the action-device, suspense and other fetishes of many present-day editors of popular magazines. In this book I do not want to emphasize the more mechanical elements of technique, for often they hamper the expression of simple, true-to-life stories.

It has no doubt become apparent to the reader that there are two methods of writing stories; the one a

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

deliberate building according to a fairly rigid prescribed form, and the other a free expression of a narrative in the most effective manner, regardless of whether or not it fits in with any standard conventions of the short-story.

The popular formula-stories, replete with action, interest-devices, and pandering to conventional notions, are today the most salable and are paid for at the highest rates. This type of fiction-writing is not especially difficult to learn, for as Arlo Bates has said, any man with the smallest gifts, reasonable intelligence, and sufficient patience may learn to write marketable stuff and earn an honest livelihood. Irvin S. Cobb, Fannie Hurst, Hugh Wiley, and other short-story writers who cater to popular tastes are held up to emulation because of the great amount of money they make by writing.

On the other hand, such authors as Wilbur Daniel Steele, Thomas Beer and others write superior stories that follow more or less the prevalent technical form. Literary excellence is not necessarily incompatible with definite technical standards.

But stories written with sincere feeling, regardless of whether they are written in the "required" form, indifferent to popular convictions, negligent of all conventions, have a greater chance of permanency because they may be as fluent as is life itself. And the author has the satisfaction of knowing that he wrote truthfully and unhampered the thoughts which most deeply characterize himself. Such stories have a constructive influence, both upon the reader and upon the art of writing. The short-stories of Rebecca West, Sherwood Anderson and like authors are praised by the discrimin-

THE PLACE OF TECHNIQUE

ating for having revealed some esoteric phase of life.

The chapters which follow are not especially designed to help you make a choice between these two methods of writing, but their main purpose is to present a survey of the most important technical elements and to encourage clear thinking. Examples are taken from the works of writers of various types of stories, but no recommendations, no "do's" or "don'ts" are insisted upon. If you practice conscious development, you will be able to choose clearly according to the mental and physical equipment with which nature has endowed you.

CHAPTER II

THE IMPORTANCE OF SITUATION

WHEN you pick up a magazine and begin reading a story, something, let us suppose, grips your attention and holds it, increasing your interest as you go on with the narrative. To you, as a reader, it is of little or no importance what alchemy or mechanics the author employs to bring about this desirable end; as an author, you find it of great moment to you. It is unlikely that you will be able to invent anything entirely new in short-story technique, as there has been no essential change there since the first story was written.

If you are aware of other authors' methods you may be able to give individual expression to something established, or at least you will be able to use effectively the same devices.

You have doubtless read a large number of stories; have you discovered how the authors schemed to get your interest? Perhaps you have written a number of your own stories, a few at least. Are you aware of the exact method by which you worked to hold the prospective reader's attention and gradually to increase his interest?

Either you are preparing yourself consciously for writing or you are blindly plodding along. Either way may or may not gain you success; but if you *know* what you are doing, if you are conscious of each new thing you learn, you will write good stories, granted

THE IMPORTANCE OF SITUATION

that you have the ability, and progress will come quickly.

Begin at once to see with your mind. Advice and rules have two sides; accept neither completely until you have developed the capacity to understand this truth.

It is not necessary to wonder inanely what is so fascinating about another's story and what is, perhaps, dull about your own. The story in the magazine grips your attention; the style is attractive, a character is unusual, the setting is pleasing, or the first paragraphs create an atmosphere of reality. But there is something more: you read further than the introduction and ordinary attention increases to lively interest.

Always there is the human struggle (or humanlike if the story is of animals). Soon style, characterization, setting give way to or are enhanced by the interest in the characters in conflict.

In every story there is a situation, or the arrangement of elements which will clash and produce conflict, and from the struggle which ensues will result a conclusion or settlement of some kind.

The experienced author is fully aware of the necessity of situation. It is not enough to have various elements in a story that might produce struggle; they must at some time clash, and struggle is the inevitable result. When the situation is revealed, interest is vitalized by the pregnant promise of conflict. It is movement or action of some kind which gives meaning to characterization, description, everything. Pictures become reality when they are animated; there is no

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

life without conflict; human conflict must therefore be the basis of fiction.

Become aware of the value of situation; begin to see life and fiction in terms of it. The study of situation in this chapter can have only one function, to make you conscious of the *meaning* of situation, its force and its general application.

An example of situation may be taken from the familiar story, "Silas Marner." There are many contributing elements to its plot, but after the story gets under way it is found that the situation confronting the main character is this:

Silas Marner, who has adopted Eppie after he found her in his home, years later is faced with the fear that she will return to her father when he comes to claim her. Will she go to him, or remain with Silas? * *

The more intense the situation the more interested the reader will be in your story. Recall almost any melodramatic tale you have read and you will find that the situation was similar to this: Randolph, a trusted friend of the family, although in reality untrustworthy and a thief, is soon to be married to the pretty daughter. Will she discover his true character before it is too late? Here something is certain to happen, and whatever it may be, it will be waited for with high-keyed interest by the reader.

Situation in a plot story, relying as it does mainly upon physical action, often has the forceful interest of two passenger trains approaching each other on the same track and going at high speed. Something must happen. What is it to be? There are several answers. If the trains meet, tragedy will result—lovers parted,

THE IMPORTANCE OF SITUATION

children orphaned, perhaps famous men killed. We may have melodrama: The hero rushes to the switch, sends one train off on a siding, then, by quick thought and action, throws back the switch in time to let the other train dash by—saved! Or we may have comedy: A man sees the approaching trains, pulls off his red shirt and flags one train, then dashes off to stop the other. He imagines himself a hero, only to find that one of the trains had received orders to switch at a siding, which it had even then just done.

However, no matter what tone you may give to the solution of this situation, it could not have been completely avoided. Some answer had to be given. Test your story to see if you have a comparable situation—one demanding a solution and an issue that can not be slighted. If you have and your story is well written, you will have achieved sustained interest. That means half of your difficulties overcome. The situation need not always be as dynamic as the railroad trains example; even one with little physical action may be full of tension. * * *

Following is an example of a story with a weak situation, taken from a manuscript written by a beginner. We see how flat it is. A young man is more interested in his studies than in people. His father wants him to get married and a third person supplies the girl. The young man refuses to marry, but his father finally persuades him, and in a ludicrous manner he proposes to the girl. At first she refuses him; then the boy's ardor grows because he now desires what is denied him. Because of his renewed interest, the girl now accepts him.

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

There was a little struggle in the son's weak opposition, but the story was dull because there was no issue in which the reader was made vitally interested and for which he demanded a solution.

However, draw the son as one who dislikes women because he thinks them weak creatures and subservient to men. Let the girl be urged on by her parents to accept the man. She learns of his attitude toward women and refuses him. The young man then falls in love with her, desiring her above anything else. Here we have a situation: Will she consent to his proposal now, or will she in turn believe that he is a man weak and servile to women and again refuse him? This makes an interesting problem that, no matter how it is solved, will vitally affect the lives of two or more characters. * * *

Another point concerning situations now confronts the author and demands clear thought. How shall the situation be presented? Is there more than one method and if so which one is best? Although examples in answer to these questions are presented in this chapter, the final answer in each case rests with you. These are not laws given to you; they are merely methods that have been employed. Their value is to make you conscious of what has been done.

It is not necessary that the situation be told immediately in your story; sometimes it does not come until near the end. But a well-written story will prepare for the situation by arousing interest in the characters taking part, in the theme involved, or in the setting or other contributing factors.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SITUATION

When the situation itself is not of unusual interest, it is often better to reveal it later. Perhaps you might get the reader interested in an odd character who is to be the hero, or have a strange setting which is destined to prove an important factor in the situation. In "The Judgement of Vulcan" (*Harper's Magazine*), by Lee Foster Hartman, the latter method of opening is used. Here a volcano, Muloa, is described and all through the story it smokes and belches fire, warning the reader of its potential power to solve the situation. The story tells of a young woman, Eleanor Stanleigh, who is to be married soon to a Mr. Joyce. The death of her husband, who deserted her, has never been satisfactorily established. Being a Catholic, she has not obtained a decree of divorce. Her husband is really alive and lives on the island where Muloa is located. The situation is: Will he arrive now to prevent or break up the marriage? Muloa finally fulfills its terrible promise and solves the problem by killing the husband.

Do not misunderstand that the situation is something that need be stated in your story in so many words. It should never protrude like the key that winds a walking doll. It may be implied in the opening paragraphs; it may be guessed after the story is well started; it may culminate near the end of your story; it may even be revealed near the end and left unsolved.

If your story is one of tense action or emotion, it is well to make known the situation immediately, as is done in "The Signal Tower" (*The Metropolitan*), by Wadsworth Camp. (See Chapter IV for analysis of this story.) The problem here is: Joe becomes drunk and sets off to get revenge on Tolliver by outraging his

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

wife. The husband is a railroad telegrapher now on duty and there is imminent danger of a collision, so he dares not leave his work. Will he be able to prevent the accident and still save his wife? By knowing at once the problem in this story, the reader is held breathless until it is finally answered in almost the last paragraph.

In "The Stick-in-the-Muds" (*Collier's Weekly*), by Rupert Hughes, the situation is not revealed until quite late. The story gains its initial interest from the scene, which is laid near Shakespeare's home along the Avon River, where an American business man is canoeing. He is reminded of a boyhood friend and then comes the story. It deals with a general problem, and after the thought is established the following situation is revealed: A young poet is the son of a practical and unsympathetic father who forces him to work. For the young man it is a struggle between ambition and environment. Which will triumph?

The situation of "Ghitza" (*The Dial*), by Konrad Bercovici, is not known until near the end of the story. The interest is sustained to this point by the portrayal of an unusual character, Ghitza, a gypsy wrestler. He is matched against the strong man of another band, and the villagers bet all they possess, including their daughters, on Ghitza. Will he throw his opponent and win the girl he loves?

Usually a solution to the situation is presented. There are some exceptions, but these are most often found in "trick" stories. One of this kind, with which most readers are no doubt familiar, is "The Lady or the Tiger," by Frank R. Stockton. Here the general

THE IMPORTANCE OF SITUATION

situation is early revealed; the particular one later. The two probable results are suggested, but the solution is left for the reader. * * *

From the foregoing study, we derive three important conclusions. First, it is necessary and vital to the story to have a situation. It provides the basis for conflict, or the movement of the story. The stronger and the more inevitable the action leading up to the situation, or that is involved in the situation, the more breathless and tense will the story be.

Second, a careful study of situations suggests new plots and developments. As was shown in the railroad trains example, there are several possible solutions to most problems, and according to the tone used, they range from the tragic to the comic. If you have difficulty in working out plots, analyze the situations of several successful stories, noting the denouement in each case, and then work out different solutions. Perhaps seek for contrast. If the situation is answered tragically, try to find a farcical ending. You cannot always do this satisfactorily, but it is mighty good practice to try.

Third, further observation made from the study of situation reveals that there are various treatments from which to choose for your story. If it is a character story with this element dominant, then it is well to withhold your situation until the reader is interested sufficiently in your hero to follow him in whatever he does. Tension in a strong plot story often is gained by telling the situation at the beginning as in "The Signal Tower." However, it is well at first to experiment

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

in order to determine which is the best place in your particular story to reveal the situation.

From then on, however, no more time can be used in preparation, for the movement must be swift or direct in developing the dilemma your characters are in. An exception to this is made in the inverted-order story (a frequent type), in which for the first paragraphs the situation is plucked from a point chronologically farther on and used to arouse the reader's interest. Then the story goes back to a preceding time and gradually leads up to the situation of the opening paragraphs.

After you have developed a good situation and decided on the method and manner of treating it, your story will most likely give you little trouble in the writing. However, something must be said about the choice of your situation. It is difficult to find one that is especially new or original, but you can couple even a hackneyed situation with a unique idea. There are but thirty-six dramatic situations, as one author has outlined them, but there are hundreds of applications, many of which perhaps have never yet been guessed.

The searching, analyzing, and testing of situations needs to be a conscious process at first. When you have become thoroughly familiar with this most important part of your writing development and mastered its difficulties, you will not need to proceed so deliberately. A writer who knows what he is about, and is thoughtfully aware of what he writes, is definitely on the road to success.

CHAPTER III

STORY SOURCES

“**N**OTHING that actually occurs is of the slightest importance,” is Oscar Wilde’s aphorism concerning art and fiction. An overstatement, doubtless, but some such radical precept is necessary to offset an equally generalized maxim of a large number of present-day fictional advisors.

These latter urge the plot-seeker invariably to turn to the newspapers and therein find adequate material for any kind of story.

Many novices resort almost exclusively to the newspaper for their plot ideas, in the belief that they are drawing upon the actual source of story material, which therefore must be reliable.

It is obvious that the author is hopelessly lost when he begins to substitute the journals for life itself. Even the practical “business” writer who builds plots mechanically and searches every possible source for material, fares little better wandering through columns of trite, interest-exhausted stories.

Newspapers unquestionably do supply some authors with good material for stories, but generally these writers have become aware of other and better sources and are able to discriminate intelligently. The newspaper is limited in its value and should be used as a last resort rather than as an ever-ready aid to lethargic imaginations.

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

To write of life, the author can go direct to its real source, for as Leonardo da Vinci declared, "the artist should be the son, not the grandson of nature."

What are the usual results of finding plot ideas in the newspapers? Most of them are *trite*, for either the facts become well known to the general public, or the authors who assiduously follow the sensational news columns for their study of life fall upon these items, swamping the editors with stories based on the same ideas, as hundreds of like-patterned hats are unloaded upon crowding women shoppers at a bargain sale.

Great numbers of news items are *repetitions* of the same frequently occurring situations, involving only different names and localities. In the newspapers, these stories deal with actual people in whom a number of others of the locality are always interested. The novice, misled by specious advice, sometimes mistakes this purely local interest for general interest and weaves the incidents into a story that has almost no chance of success.

Beware of *untimeliness*. As soon as a sensational news story fills the front pages of the journals, someone remarks what a good subject for a novel or story it would make. Possibly so—should the author have written his imaginative story before the actual occurrence! Would magazine readers or editors be interested in a fictional rehash of any one of the sensational stories that make lurid the "yellow" press? Two or three popular magazines were printing serial stories dealing with life at Hollywood at the time of, or soon after, the sensational Arbuckle case; but editors of these magazines declared that the stories had been

STORY SOURCES

purchased before Hollywood began to attract the attention of the world's scandal-lovers.

Plot ideas need not be gathered from the newspapers, for every writer can find within himself first-hand plot germs that are generally superior to and more original than the average plot suggestions to be found in the newspapers.

Do not make a mental crutch of the newspaper. The author can exploit himself, his friends, and all things with which he is acquainted to secure material that is interesting, stimulating and vital.

Two kinds of writers are easily distinguishable—those wishing to create sincere stories reflective of and illuminating life, and authors who are in the business of devising any fiction for which there is a market demand.

To the first type of writer, the world with life and its problems, provides his textbook. Whether he is able to learn well from this volume depends chiefly upon his ability to become conscious of what exists, both in the physical and mental world. Talent and thought must go hand in hand.

But even the purely creative writer needs some form in which to give expression to his story. He may, and the author of plot stories will, find his own equipment better for inventing situations than what the daily press generally has to offer.

The tools for conscious invention of plots are: Paradox, Exaggeration, the Apparently Impossible, and the New Twist. These terms are given, not as something original—authors are always seeking plots that incorporate these elements—but to suggest a feasible and

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

ever-new method of making use of them at first hand by consciously understanding the device.

Following are plot germs suggested by nothing more than the key-word heading in each case. It is easy and stimulating to devise such story suggestions:

PARADOX

A beautiful woman who wishes to be ugly.

Strong man envies a weakling.

Ambitious young man who refuses an advancement.

A great fighter who won't fight.

An exquisitely beautiful home among negro shanties.

EXAGGERATION

A humorous Irishman who is king of an African tribe.

A fabulous country where the national hymn is written in jazz music and popular songs are taught in the schools.

A man of almost supernatural mental power who can exercise weird influence on others.

A hundred clocks of various kinds, always ticking, affect the impressionable clocksmith.

THE APPARENTLY IMPOSSIBLE

A man is shot but does not appear to be injured.

A prisoner escapes from a room in which there are no doors, windows, or openings of any kind.

A large stone house is seen by several persons to vanish at times.

THE NEW TWIST

Man who sets out to succeed in business, beginning as a clerk, opens a school for salesmen when he fails.

STORY SOURCES

Rivals for the same girl decide not to follow other rivals' methods, but to help each other win the girl. She marries a third rival who urged his own suit.

A shop that is haunted.

With any of the foregoing plot germs to work on, the author need but use his ingenuity to write an interesting story, granted he has ability to write.

To develop the puzzling plot germs suggested in this chapter, it is logical that the author should work them out according to the responses aroused in the prospective reader. The Paradox plot germs should answer the question, "Why?"—Exaggeration, "What is to come from this?"—the Apparently Impossible, "How?"—the New Twist should arouse certain expectations in order to gain a surprise by logically substituting it for what is expected. The last example given under the fourth classification owes its place there to the fact that a usual story atmosphere, that of a haunted house, is applied to a shop. This device can be used effectively by transferring similar situations to unexpected places, or by treating any old idea in a new way.

The author has a prolific field—the entire world of thought and experience—to draw upon for material. He should get as much as possible at first hand from within himself. When the author turns to the printed page for plot germs, let it be to articles and books of informative character—travel, science, philosophy, and the like—where he may gain material that can be better molded with the stamp of his individuality.

CHAPTER IV

DETERMINING THE ANGLE

THERE is a story about a man who dreamed that he was five different persons at the same time. When one of them moved about or spoke, the others became motionless puppets; so he had to jump quickly from one to another to animate all of them.

A dream of this sort is, perhaps, an uncommon experience, but almost any reader of popular fiction may have had a similar vicarious experience, due to the author's misguided mechanics.

Stories may be rescued from such defects by conscious attention, while writing, to a very important principle of short-story technique. A story is usually more artistic and more effective when told as but one of the characters sees or experiences the incidents. So told, a story is said to have a single viewpoint or angle of narration.

This is the result of a decision by the author to be only one of his characters; or, as when the first person is employed, the narrator.

To maintain a single viewpoint you must not report anything that the hero does not know, see, or hear about. You must not desert the hero to investigate your other characters' minds, for the hero could know what they are thinking only by what they express in words or actions, or by other responses. Thus you can

DETERMINING THE ANGLE

tell what other characters *seem* to think, and yet keep the same angle of narration.

The angle of narration gives to many novices and some experienced authors a great deal of difficulty, much of which is due to lack of thought.

In the process of evolving a story—through conscious evolution—it is most important, after you have devised your situation, to decide upon the best angle of narration to employ.

In this book we shall consider only the single point of view, as it is one most difficult to understand and to keep unified. If you know how to employ the single viewpoint you will have no trouble with the other points, for he who consciously rejects the single point of view cannot well err in employing another. The writer, however, should become fully aware of the possibilities of the one angle of narration, so that he will not heedlessly break it or fail to employ it because of lack of understanding.

Other viewpoints that may be employed are simply unrestricted single angles of narration. These, briefly, are the Omniscient viewpoint, or the 'all-seeing, all-knowing' angle which explores many characters' minds and observes the actions of many characters; the External, or the all-seeing angle which observes the actions of many characters; the Varying, which is concerned principally with one character but observes others. The single viewpoint concentrates definitely upon what only one character sees, hears, and understands.

When the beginner has difficulty in maintaining a single viewpoint, he will do well to write a story, for

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

practice, in the first person. Such stories are sometimes considered rather difficult to sell, but the writing of them is a most important "finger exercise."

Stevenson's "The Merry Men" begins: "It was a beautiful morning in the late July when I set forth on foot for the last time for Aros. * * * I had such breakfast as the little inn afforded. * * *" The reader knows that whatever is told in this story will be a part of the personal experience or knowledge of the narrator. It would be ridiculous, for example, for the story to continue somewhat as follows: "My simple meal finished, I was accosted by the waiter; his face was expressionless, but he was thinking that I was a fool to walk to Aros where unknown dangers awaited me. He said nothing of this to me, however; only, 'Is there anything else, sir?' "

Unless the narrator were a consummate mind-reader, this would be an impossibility from the narrator's viewpoint. Seldom, if ever, in first-person stories is such an error made; but in stories of the third person, it occurs frequently. The author in the latter case feels that he has more latitude and may, if he chooses, report something that the character he is following has not seen or heard. But often this is inartistic.

Furthermore, it is likely to interrupt the smoothness of a story in which the single viewpoint has been maintained, by jerking away suddenly to show a bit of another angle. Perhaps the author finds a single consistent angle of narration more difficult; but this tax upon his energy and skill will often produce a more finished piece of work.

An admirable story of character, "Editha," by Wil-

DETERMINING THE ANGLE

liam Dean Howells, in *Harper's*, is told from Editha's angle, but it is marred by an unnecessary lapse from the single viewpoint. For the time being the reader is the young woman. He believes as she does—perhaps against his will—thinks as she does, and acts in the same manner. Now consider, after two-thirds of the story is read, how jarring it is, for two brief paragraphs, to have to be someone else!

We read:

“ ‘Don't come, mother !’ Editha called, vanishing.”

Then :

“Mrs. Balcom remained to reproach her husband. ‘I don't see much of anything to laugh at.’

“ ‘Well, it's catching * * *’ (Mr. Balcom explains.) ‘I guess it won't be much of a war, and I guess Gearson don't think so either.’ * * *”

This break in the angle of narration is unnecessary, for ten brief paragraphs later the same idea—that the war will not long continue—is given when Gearson tells it to Editha. It will often be found that there is little excuse for such digressions.

In a novel or novelette, where the author is acting as an omniscient being, able to probe the minds of many, to flash from one character to another, and to do other tricks of magic and supernatural attainment, the strict unity of the single point of view may prove a handicap, but in the short-story it generally establishes its value by getting the reader more definitely into the spirit of the viewpoint character.

A mystery yarn in a recent issue of a detective-story

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

magazine dealt with five or six characters, and the angle changed with every other paragraph. Reading the story was an experience very similar to the dream mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. In the story the reader was called upon to be vicariously first the daughter in her home; then her lover, miles distant; now a tramp, bent upon harm to the girl; again the young woman; her father now, hurrying home, troubled with a premonition of evil; once more the daughter, playing the piano; now the tramp, stealing into the house; then the girl's lover, thinking of her. And so it went—a nightmare of being half a dozen persons in bewildering succession.

This story would have been incomparably more interesting and effective had the one angle of narration been maintained. Told from the girl's viewpoint—or perhaps better, the father's—all of the necessary action could have been included, and instead of weakening the tension, it would have greatly increased it.

A limited viewpoint may be necessary for many reasons. A careful understanding of its purposes will show that it aids in securing unity and cohesion, and helps to create interest and maintain suspense. The single angle of narration does not necessarily do all these things for every story, but it assists in accomplishing at least one of them.

Especially in a story of many characters does the single viewpoint make for unity and cohesion. When the author decides, for the space of his story, to be one character and no other, he is following one road, and is not so likely to wander off into bypaths that will destroy the single purposefulness requisite in a short-

DETERMINING THE ANGLE

story. The mystery story discussed in a foregoing paragraph would have gained in cohesion by the employment of one angle of narration, thus tying together the bits of stories two or three paragraphs long.

Interest is enhanced by the technicality, especially in character and psychological stories, for the reader's attention is directed upon one person. In this type of story it becomes annoying if the reader is switched off to a new viewpoint character. The single angle is vital to the interest of the mood story, for any change will injure the feeling or tone, and may destroy it.

The novice writer often errs in believing that by the maintaining one angle of narration suspense is endangered. This may be true of longer stories, but the opposite generally obtains in a short-story where instead of suspense being weakened it is often increased.

A well-written story, "The Three Telegrams," by Esther Storm, appearing in *The Ladies' Home Journal*, made use of this device by keeping the viewpoint the same as Claire Rene's. The eight-year-old girl's brothers are away to war, and her grandmother is ill. One by one the girl receives three telegrams from the war department; she is afraid of them, and though she is not able to read them herself, she does not show them to anyone. The story is not melodramatic, but whatever suspense it has is maintained by consistently keeping the angle of narration Claire's. The story's style and characterization contribute, but these would not have been able to keep up the suspense had, for example, Jacques, one of the characters, said to himself, "Poor little girl. Little she knows that her brothers will never come back." It is by continually seeing and

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

feeling the events as Claire does that the reader is urged on to the end.

In *The Red Book*, a story by Edward Mott Woolley, "The Keys to Ausable," is told from the angle of Jimmy Hazelton, but a break is made to tell of an incident between Bob and Agnes, which results in antagonizing Hiram Clark, who sets up a rival automobile agency. The author here probably felt that it was better to break the angle, permitting the reader thus to *see* the episode, rather than to preserve the single viewpoint and have Bob tell Jimmy what took place.

The change is not necessarily an error, but the story would have earned a better unity and more artistic whole had the break not been made. This is an incident in point where the author is called upon to think. He may write thoughtlessly, or he may be constantly aware of what he is penning and thus escape falling into pits that his reason would protect him from.

The author should give conscious attention to avoid making small changes that add nothing by varying the viewpoint. Olive Wadsley wrote her "Diamonds and Roses," in *Saucy Stories*, from Billy's angle, yet allowed herself such a lapse as the following:

"In point of fact, the attendant paid jolly little heed to Billy at all."

"'Fine looking boy; who is he?' a man asked a friend."

It is obvious, of course, that Billy did not know what these people said or thought of him, so comment such

DETERMINING THE ANGLE

as this could have been omitted in the interest of strict unity.

I have no desire to quibble about insignificant exceptions to a single viewpoint if the author makes them knowingly, aware of some value to be gained thereby.

Another single point of view that may be employed is that of a third person who has nothing to do with the dramatic action, being merely a reporter or narrator. Many of the "once upon a time" fairy tales are of such a type. By the use of this viewpoint, the reader is made to feel an easy familiarity with the story-teller, as if he were sitting nearby, talking with him.

"The Life of Five Points," by Edna Clare Bryner (*The Dial*) is a story told from a single collective angle. It is a story of a town in the woods, such as might be told by a historian who saw deeper than the building and rebuilding of a city; who saw the pathos and foibles of human beings in a large, inclusive way. This story has for a plot the persistent struggle of humanity, handicapped or aided by its own attributes, against the forces of nature. The viewpoint employed—a collective one of the citizens—is not ordinarily used, and is worthy of careful study.

Occasionally certain viewpoints are inadvisable. It is clear that the Sherlock Holmes tales could not well be told from the detective's viewpoint; but the author should try to avoid the "Dr. Watson" angle in such stories as being hackneyed. Mystery stories, and in general those that depend upon unknown or uncanny elements, and those based upon misunderstanding, should not as a rule be told from the viewpoints of

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

characters who would be in a position throughout to reveal the answers to the difficulties.

Two viewpoints are finding disfavor with editors at present; that of the detective story told by the stupid friend of the great sleuth, and the third-person story that breaks off after the first few paragraphs, to continue as a narration in the first person—or the story within a story.

Another way of telling a story, now generally frowned upon, is that in which the author obtrudes himself. Ivan Turgenev, the Russian writer, does this several times in his excellent story, "Mumu," as, "But before reporting their conversation to the reader, we consider it not out of place to relate in a few words * *'" And again, "The reader will now readily understand the perturbation of mind that overtook the steward Gavril. * * *'" The story is otherwise told in the third person, impersonally, and mostly from the viewpoint of Gerasim, a mighty servant.

When the author consciously understands the principle of the single angle of narration, he is then confronted with the problem of choosing which angle to employ.

Again thought—not daydreaming and seldom "intuition"—is necessary. If you know exactly *why* you make your choice, you will not slight the best angle for one you imagine to be good. The success of a story depends upon many things.

The writer must choose for himself; he should know which character will best develop his idea and situation. And, of course, he should be guided partly by the character he understands best. Very often what makes

DETERMINING THE ANGLE

a story appropriate for a woman's magazine is that it is told from the angle of a woman character; told from a man's angle, the same story may be not at all suitable.

To illustrate the effect of different viewpoints, the following study is given of "The Signal Tower."

The story is written from Tolliver's angle, and we see him trying to reassure Sally, his wife, against her fear of being alone in their remote home, far from the railroad station where he works. Joe, who with Tolliver keeps the signal station, was formerly a boarder at their home, but because of his infatuation for Sally, was told to leave. The husband sends their son home with his revolver, which he had kept at the office. Joe is drunk and tells Tolliver, who relieves him at the telegraph instrument, that he is going to see Sally. There is imminent danger of a wreck, so personal troubles must wait. All during his nerve-straining hours of work, is the fear of what is happening at home. Joe does not relieve him at the specified time, and though this increases his suspicions and misery, the lives of a trainload of passengers are dependent upon his remaining at work.

This viewpoint ekes out every drop of suspense, for Tolliver can only guess, and he imagines the worst of what is happening at home. When his wife later drags herself to him, his fears seem to have been realized. But Sally confesses that she killed Joe in self-defense, and he is satisfied.

Had the story been told from the wife's angle, the development would have been somewhat as follows: Sally's fear of Joe seems to be unfounded, for it is

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

nearly time for her husband to return. But now Joe forces his way into the house. He is drunk and her little son shrinks away from him. Sally tries to gain time, for surely Joe will not fail to return to his duty. But her hope is lost. She wonders why Tolliver does not return, for he must know that something is wrong at home when Joe fails to come. For a little while she hates him who holds duty higher than her honor. Joe is making for her now. She dreads to kill a man, especially as she believes that her husband will then hate her; but she must choose, and her gun flashes.

The story might have been told from Joe's angle. He is enraged that the Tollivers should deny him their home because Sally is so pretty that he fell in love with her. He swears revenge, and liquor strengthens his determination. With devilish cunning he realizes that today is a most opportune time, for he knows Tolliver's loyalty to duty. There is danger of a wreck, so he will have his and Tolliver's time for revenge. Drunk-enly, he reels toward the remote home. Sally is alone with her small son. Joe feels that he has plenty of time; let her fear him awhile. He is surprised to find that she has a revolver; but she will be afraid to use it. She is only a woman. He laughs at her threat, plunges toward her, and is about to grab her, when the revolver crashes, and he stares in drunken wonder at the flash, then falls to the floor. This point of view is sometimes objected to, for the viewpoint character dies and so, of course, his story could not naturally be told from his viewpoint.

Finally, the story could have been told from the boy's viewpoint. Without realizing the significance and the

DETERMINING THE ANGLE

danger implied by the weapon, the boy carries home the revolver his father intrusts to him. Vaguely he knows that his mother wants to protect herself with this heavy gun, and he feels that some of the responsibility rests upon himself. He watches his mother place the weapon on a shelf, and busies himself by telling her what a brave person he is and how he would protect her from giants and dragons. Then the door is pushed open and Joe enters. The boy is frightened, but he remembers his boasting. He tells the man to go, but is pushed aside. The boy recalls his fairy tales and wonders what he can do against this big man. Joe is frightening his mother. He does not know whether to run for his father or not; then he remembers the revolver on the shelf, climbs upon a chair to get it, and gives it to his mother just in time for her to use the weapon to protect herself from the drunken man.

The author must choose the viewpoint he is best able to handle, or the one that creates the greatest interest and tension. Tolliver's is, no doubt, the most effective here. Also, by not showing the actual scene in which a woman kills a man, the story finds greater favor with the editors, who are inclined to shun "unpleasant" stories. Wadsworth Camp is an experienced author and perhaps knew at once which angle to employ, but I am sure that he did not make his choice by some happy accident.

Consciously apply yourself, then, while planning a story, to choose the most effective angle of narration. With the same clearness of thought, follow throughout your story a single viewpoint, if you have determined

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

that strict unity in the particular narrative is best, not because some rule says it is, or because this chapter has stressed this angle, or even because one-viewpoint stories are supposed to be more salable ; but make your choice because you have decided that it is necessary and vital.

CHAPTER V

THE USE OF HUMAN INTEREST

WHEN George M. Cohan found that one of his plays was not arousing sustained interest in the audience, he introduced into the cast an American flag-waving character. This interest-arousing device has become proverbial. What is the psychology of its appeal?

"Patriotism" is not a sufficient explanation. Back of that is a fundamental emotion, which is found in some form and developed to a greater or lesser degree in each of us. A national flag dramatically introduced in a play forces an instantaneous emotional reaction, not the product of thought but of conventional training, sustained by the feeling of pride, loyalty, or love of country.

It is well for the writer to know that it is through the emotions that people are united in a common relationship, whatever the locality or age. And as emotion plays a highly important part in all stories, its place should be consciously understood.

Emotional effect is produced both by the author's choice of words and by the actions of his characters. Whether the feeling will be of a superficial character or of a deeper nature depends upon the author's ability to reach his reader's emotions through his intelligence. To arouse an emotion based upon the reader's experience, intelligence, and feeling is the aim of the most

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

capable authors. It is not enough merely to make the reader feel sorry for, or lend his immediate sympathy to, a beggar who is being beaten, a wife who has been deserted, or a mother whose children have spurned her, but these authors try to make the reader *understand* the situation in each case, so that emotion will be awakened from the complex causes of real life.

Most of the popular-magazine editors, however, do not demand this difficult realistic manner of arousing emotions. Although sentimentality is sometimes frowned upon, they generally ask for little more than superficial emotional reactions. Thus the arousing of the reader's feelings often becomes merely a scheme to intensify interest. This sort of emotional interest is called "human interest," and the term will be used in this book to designate the emotional actions of the characters purposely planned to arouse the reader's instinctive or sentimental feeling.

Human interest may be compared to a physiological reflex action. For example, when a person is unexpectedly jabbed with a pin, he immediately responds by some physical reaction. This response occurs without a command from the brain. And so is human interest a response without intellectual interference.

The newspapers recently carried a story about a page who, answering a telephone call, said to the caller, "Hold the line, Old Bean." He later learned that he had been speaking to the king. Shortly afterward, the page was called to the palace. But, the king was evidently pleased with the boy's unintentional disrespect, for he rewarded him with one hundred *peseta*.

This story has human interest. The appeal is purely

THE USE OF HUMAN INTEREST

emotional and of an elementary nature. Most readers would be inclined to say, "Oh, the king was human after all. He liked being addressed as a common man. He was a good king."

Intellectual consideration of this incident may not substantiate such a conclusion. And the same story might be told so that the element of human interest would be lacking. The anecdote, related by a psychologist who should explain the underlying reasons for the king's generosity, would probably dispel the reader's feeling of direct kinship with the characters.

Why the human-interest device should be employed is a question that may well be asked. Human interest gives the story an aura of familiarity, and hence of truthfulness, for it endows the characters with elemental feelings that are in common with our own and belong to every day's experience. Also, as above shown, it quickly arouses the reader's emotions. Emotion is the strongest agent for holding the reader's attention and keeping him interested in the narrative. A story's principal if not sole purpose is to interest; any device which can be employed to serve this end is valuable; but its use should be based upon conscious selection.

When the human-interest device should be employed is an equally important question. The answer must depend upon you. If you are interested in, or qualified only for writing simple everyday stories, the sort of fiction that appeals to the popular and family magazines, use human interest freely, understanding it. If you want to write stories that go below the surface of life, human interest will most likely be out of place

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

unless judiciously employed to substantiate an intellectual conviction.

How two authors may work with similar material and one write a human-interest story while the other does not, is shown in the analysis which follows:

John M. Siddall, the late editor of *The American Magazine*, selected "The Terrible Charge Against Jeff Potter," by Samuel A. Derieux, as the story best typifying the ideals of his magazine of any appearing in *The American* during 1920. The story tells of Jeff, an aged man, shiftless according to the opinion of some, but an extremely lovable man to most. At the outset of the story Jeff is abused unwarrantably; later, he is tried for a serious crime which the reader knows he did not commit. Throughout the story he is shown to be a worthy man whom children and women adore for his kindness to them. Jeff is vindicated. The concluding paragraph of the story is charged with human interest:

"How many people old Jeff shook hands with that afternoon, he never knew. He did know though that Burton Evans was the first among them; that Mrs. Carson, who came next, was crying; that the strong hands of Bill Carson and Squire Kirby almost crushed his own frailer hand; and that off yonder, at a table below the clerk's desk, a prim old lawyer in a long black coat had picked up a carved Indian and was presenting it to a little girl in a blue dress, with an old-fashioned bow strange to see."

In this story the reader is made to sympathize with Jeff Potter through ordinary, everyday emotions, such

THE USE OF HUMAN INTEREST

as love of children, kindness to animals, and a broad brotherhood of man. The reader's interest is solicited, but his intelligence is not called upon to substantiate his emotion. There is no gushing emotion, only homespun kindness, which attribute of our grandfathers is yet held up as a virtue to most of us.

Another story based upon an aged, kindly character, who finds brotherhood in all men, is "Brothers" (*The Bookman*), by Sherwood Anderson. It is a better story than the first, but it is without human interest.

This does not mean that the story makes no definite human appeal; it is a very human story. But it lacks the device of human interest, for its appeal is not of the "reflex" emotional type. Sympathy for the old man of the story is won through an intellectual understanding of the character; emotion is awakened through a more complex reaction than is made by the human-interest type of story.

The human-interest story, however, continues to make the strongest popular appeal, attribute the fact to what you will. Editors are of course unequally influenced. Harford Powell, Jr., editor of *Collier's*, said, in telling of the kinds of stories he prefers, that the enduring themes for short-stories are the enduring themes in life itself—the old copybook virtues, like self-sacrifice, courage, generosity, resourcefulness and faith.

When the author employs these "copybook virtues" so that he arouses the reader's ready and unqualified emotion, he achieves human interest.

William MacLeod Raine employs human-interest devices very skillfully in "Tangled Trails." This is a mystery story with the setting for the first chapter a

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

business office. The reader's sympathy is immediately won for a young woman who has been wronged by her employer. This has a "sure-fire" appeal. It wakens chivalry without the assistance of prolonged cogitations. The novel might have been opened with the interesting rodeo scene described later, but by making a human-interest appeal at the start it won the reader's sympathy at once. Where there is a wrong to be righted, there is no question of sides to be taken.

Human interest selects some attribute that everyone possesses and presents only one view; it does not encourage thought—only immediate acceptance of the one facet presented. As in the story of the king and the page, it seems to reveal that we are all alike and that the whole world is kin.

In "The Idyl of Red Gulch," Bret Harte made telling use of human interest. The story deals with a lonely schoolteacher who begins a friendship with the town drunkard. Later she is asked by an unmarried mother to take her son to raise respectably. The schoolteacher learns that the drunkard, for whom she begins to feel an interest bordering on love, is the father of the boy. The scene in which the mother begs that her boy be given a chance at decency wipes out the respective individualities of the characters concerned and the reader is face to face with the universal emotion of all animal kind—mother love. Bret Harte put the climax of his story on the simplest emotional plane, and the result is intense human-interest appeal.

Human interest is bound up in heart-throbs. It is found in the "never-darken-my-door-again" scene of the old melodramas, in which the father refuses the

THE USE OF HUMAN INTEREST

shelter of his home to his erring but repentant daughter. As primitive hearts always beat to the same rhythm, the author writing for the magazines which appeal to the masses does well to make use of this universal principle. Self-sacrifice, mother love, kindness, are always certain of their appeal to all but the skeptical and the highly sophisticated. An author employing human interest can lay his scenes in California, Alaska, Africa, or Mars, and create stories of equally wide appeal.

Moving pictures are a good indication of the effectiveness of human interest. They have as representative an audience as the popular magazines; and what is true of them is largely true of the short-story. The observer will find that spectacular pictures of the types chiefly notable for involving tremendous expense seldom attain the popularity or contain the deep appeal of photodramas telling simple stories which drive straight for the basic emotions of the spectator, as in "Over the Hill," "The Old Nest," and "Way Down East."

How to make use of the device of human interest is a problem that the writer must work out very largely for himself. When viewing motion pictures, and in his everyday experiences, he should try to observe what acts arouse his emotions most readily, what foibles or deeds of men most quickly bring tears or laughter.

By thus becoming aware of emotional effects in life and in fiction, the writer is well equipped. But do not wait until you have a story to write before beginning to search for incidents that will help you; observe intelligently now so that you will be able to use human inter-

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

est convincingly when you decide upon its necessity or value for your story.

As already shown in this chapter, the device may be employed in a variety of ways. It may be used to arouse the reader's interest at the opening of a story, as in "Tangled Trails." Again, the interest may be of a complex or intellectual nature until a crisis or the climax, when the appeal may be made through some powerful basic emotion, as in "The Idyl of Red Gulch." Or, the story may deal with kindly human emotions throughout, as in "The Terrible Charge Against Jeff Potter."

The device should, of course, be employed judiciously. An overdose of human-interest appeal may make a story too saccharine or sentimental. Too much sugar will spoil the best cup of coffee.

CHAPTER VI

SYNTHETIC CHARACTERIZATION

WE are all egoists. There is no truth but my truth. No world but my world. I am I! Thus said Max Stirner, the greatest of egoistic philosophers; and so may the fictional adviser say to your characters, "You are you!" No two peas in a pod are precisely alike, no two persons see the same shade of blue, though they look at the same cerulean sky.

Two psychological facts regarding human nature should be understood by the fiction-writer. First, basically no man is cast in a wholly different mold from that of his fellow beings; in most respects he is a pattern of hundreds of others of the same type, and only men like Napoleon, Nero, Lincoln, Nietzsche and St. Paul individualize some phase of the race's fundamental qualities, until they stand alone, geniuses of the ego. Second, each individual of every type varies in some degree. His reactions to stimuli are different from those of a twin brother who has been reared in the same environment and received the same training; his thoughts and mannerisms vary perceptibly, though perhaps only by a shade.

The novice writer unlearned in psychology, psychoanalysis, and kindred sciences that reveal the workings of the human mechanism, will do well to avoid writing about supermen, confining himself to learning the

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

simple differences that make distinguishable to the ordinary man one person from another.

The art of characterization requires conscious understanding. Every day we come in contact with persons who differ from one another; always we have ourselves to reveal to us how one individual differs in so many ways from others we know. Why is it then that the author frequently fails to differentiate his story people—that he falls into such “characterization” as this:

“She was dressed in black, and her face was very pale, topped by very black hair.”

Chiefly, it may be because he is not aware of the methods of characterization. No one who realized that characterization means differentiation would write the foregoing description. He might as well say, “I bought a ring with a stone in it,” and mean thereby to indicate that he purchased a carved white-gold ring set with a two-carat yellow diamond.

The reader is interested in story people not only because of what they do, but also because a well-written story makes vivid such men and women as he often sees but lacks acquaintance or insight for understanding.

Much of Henry James’ art lies in his power to differentiate his characters. He was no doubt highly conscious of the technique of characterization, and when he wrote of the pale-faced woman dressed in black he made her stand out from every other pale woman similarly clothed. In “The Private Life” he thus describes her:

“I had originally been rather afraid of her, thinking

SYNTHETIC CHARACTERIZATION

her, with her stiff silences and the extreme blackness of almost everything that made up her person, somewhat hard, even saturnine. Her paleness seemed slightly gray, and her glossy black hair metallic, like the brooches and bands and combs with which it was inveterately adorned. She was perpetually in mourning."

Modern writers seldom give a photographic description of a character—that is, present in one paragraph a complete portrayal and have done with picturization. Often the picture is not completed until well along in the story. For example, the description of the pale, dark-haired woman may be given in the course of several paragraphs, with perhaps a hundred words or more between each bit, as follows:

"‘* * *,’ she said, as darkly as the extreme blackness of almost everything that made up her person.

"The silence of the Alps seemed accentuated by her stiff silences, and I was rather afraid of her, thinking her somewhat hard, even a little saturnine.

"As I greeted her this morning I noticed that her paleness seemed slightly gray.

"As she came in for dinner her glossy black hair impressed me as being metallic, like the brooches and bands and combs with which it was inveterately adorned."

Thus, bit by bit her appearance and a suggestion of her mental qualities would be built up. However, the writer should not suppose that characterization is accomplished only by giving a word-picture of the person

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

in question. This might suffice in disposing of a minor character, but the principal actors in a story are made to live by a more complex method. From the following example it becomes evident why the author cannot feel that he has satisfactorily created a character when he has described him. An author may say of his hero: "He was a calm professorial gentleman whose diction was as precise and dignified as his manner," while throughout the story the author unwittingly allows the reader to *see* the man in an entirely different way—due to the author's failure to co-ordinate the character's actions and dialogue with his description—by such passages as this:

"He punched the arm of the stranger next to him at the theater, and said in a loud voice, 'My, isn't it tough how things will happen?'"

The writer who has thought about his characters and knows them will not fail to make them consistent in every way. Characterization, as already suggested, is brought about in other ways besides that of a mere statement by the author. Just as, in real life, we form our impressions of people not alone by appearances, in fiction we get a composite understanding of the characters through dialogue, actions and mental equipment. James Joyce has made a large number of characters vivid to the reader in his "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," by relating throughout the book only the thoughts of the hero in the manner that thoughts run through the mind of such a one.

The more important methods by which characterization is effected are reviewed in the following paragraphs:

SYNTHETIC CHARACTERIZATION

Dialogue should be differentiated so as to reveal the character of the participant who is speaking. This is done in a more subtle way than by employing "trick" words, such as certain slang phrases, or by dropping the "g" of "-ing" endings, or even by repetition of certain stock words, as "Well, well!" When Markheim speaks, in Stevenson's story of that name, the reader knows who is speaking, because he puts an emotion into the words that no one else would. Consider how various fictional characters might say, "I ask you for a Christmas present and you give me a mirror. What do you mean by that?" and then observe how Markheim declares himself:

"I ask you for a Christmas present, and you give me this—this damned reminder of years and sins and follies—this hand conscience. Did you mean it? Had you a thought in your mind? Tell me."

Mental qualities are indicative of character, especially in a subjective story where thoughts of the characters are given. The dialogue may be commonplace, whereas the mental processes may be highly individual. In the case of a colorless sort of man a few words as to his subjective qualities may at once differentiate him, as in the following quotation from "The Visits," by Henry James:

"He had a mind like a large full milk-pan and his wit was as thick as cream."

An even more subtle delineation, by revealing the character's thoughts, is accomplished in Charles J. Finger's story, "The Lizard God" (in *All's Well*). Here a professor and curator of a museum is the narrator.

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

No description of him is given, but the reader is made to see and understand the man perfectly from such passages as this, which is a transcription of the man's thoughts.

"His argument, of course, was absurd, and at the moment I had no answer ready, though since I have thought of the thing I should have said."

Here another means of characterization enters in—*occupation*. By knowing that the man is a professor the reader learns something definite of his nature—just as we should expect a grave-digger or a public executioner to have peculiarities different from those of other men.

A *peculiarity*, whether of thought or action, is always a good means of differentiation, and the writer has but to study the people with whom he comes in contact to learn of countless mannerisms, obsessions, and idiosyncrasies. Sherwood Anderson created a very vivid character whose eccentricity serves as a medium for telling his story, "Brothers." Here is a description of his obsession:

"He has told me of men and women who were his brothers and sisters, his cousins, aunts, uncles, brothers-in-law. The notion has possessed him. He cannot draw close to people near at hand so he gets hold of a name out of the newspapers, and his mind plays with it."

A character can be made to escape a colorless classification by his *dress*. Witness Strindberg's "His clothes fit him like the bark of a tree." Authors interested in pseudoscientific studies can seriously or facetiously use

SYNTHETIC CHARACTERIZATION

the following subjects to reveal character: auras, phrenology, graphology, palmistry. The student of the "complexes," etc., of psychoanalysis may use dream symbols and other subconscious materials to reveal the subtle forces that determine and differentiate every man's character. Sherwood Anderson's unusual story, "The Other Woman" (*The Little Review*), deals with the psychological situation of a man who is "Freudian," as young psychoanalysts would term him.

A man's character may also be revealed, although he is at no time introduced in the story, by the influence he has upon those who play the important roles of the narrative.

The foregoing is a fairly comprehensive synopsis of the various fictional methods which may be used to reveal character. Most authors employ more than one of them; all may well be used.

Once a character has been made vivid to the reader, the simple device of *repetition* maintains the sharpness, as for instance in one of Anton Chekhov's stories, where the hero's dialogue is constantly marked by his penchant for rhyming meaningless words.

If a character has some distinguishing feature, as a crooked nose, it may be well to make the most of the characteristic. The man can be kept clear by varying the reference to him from, say, "John went out," to "The man with the crooked nose went out."

Variety may be obtained in repetition by comparisons, as, "John's scheme was unquestionably crooked, as obviously so as his nose"; and by the dialogue of other characters, as "'Here comes an honest man,' said

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

Bert, 'with a straight face—and a crooked nose, which belies his honesty.' ”

The author should learn to use his judgment so that he will be able to employ this legitimate device and yet not abuse it. Aldous Huxley makes use of this technicality in a very effective manner in his novel, “Crome Yellow,” to which the student may refer.

So far this chapter has concerned itself with the methods of revealing character. A man reveals himself in a multitude of ways, so you have practically no limit of sources. How well you will be able to draw from them must remain your problem, its solution depending upon your native ability and the degree of understanding you have attained.

How actually to build up a character and make of him a figure, living and moving, is something beyond teaching. Study people consciously, noting their appearances, mannerisms, clothes, speech, general behavior, and probe all to determine their thoughts.

If you go into a barber-shop, notice how one man methodically removes his collar and tie, carefully takes off his coat, pats it, and hangs it up by the loop intended for that use. Another jerks off his collar, struggles out of his coat, and claps it onto the nearest hanger. And if you would write stories above the average, find out *why* one man is methodical and another is careless; *why* one woman is neat and another is slovenly; *why* a man may be jolly in a crowd, yet is morose when alone. So on ad infinitum.

There are doubtless physical reasons for many individual characteristics, but there is also a psychological reason. If you are not mentally inquisitive, if you do

SYNTHETIC CHARACTERIZATION

not observe keenly, if you cannot become aware of emotional differences in individuals, your characterization will never achieve more than mere generalization.

Good reading will help. Analysis of yourself, especially of the stimuli that motivate your actions and of the manner in which you react to them, will prove invaluable as self-instruction in the art of characterization.

Study the faces of people you see in the street ; peer into their eyes and try to read what is hidden there. If you are good at mimicking, imitate the expressions you see on faces ; note the feelings aroused within you by your play-acting, and you may become an adept at reading people's emotions and thoughts from their expressions. Remember how you mirrored hate, scorn, surprise, and other emotions, and you will know how to describe your characters when you want to reveal them expressing these feelings. To make characterization convincing and distinctive, you must be able to reveal to the reader the individual manner in which each of your characters expresses emotion. Begin to observe your friends more closely, and as an experiment see how each one reveals joy otherwise than by speech. And learn the differences in their verbal expression, too !

No rule can be given that will enable you to realize your characters. Some authors live in imagination the lives of their characters ; some write biographies of their casts ; others try their characters in various situations in order to get a complete understanding of them. But each writer must choose his own method.

All men and women are suitable persons for stories.

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

The more conventional they are the more they will appeal to the conservative magazines. On the other hand, the more individual, and if necessary, the more unconventional you make your characters, the more will your story appeal to another class of publication.

No legitimate restrictions exist. You may write about the laborer who toils and sweats, the harlot who knows no other life and doesn't care to change her ways, the business man who is willing to succeed by unfair means, the minister who is not so spiritual as his congregation believes him to be. In the enormous crowds that swarm the streets of cities when the offices close for the evening are thousands of persons each one of whom has a life-story; the drab laborious lives of isolated farmers have their stories, too; no one lives so prosaically that the capable writer may not find superior material in his existence for a story.

Whether a writer should try to characterize the people of a story is a question which apparently demands a ready answer in the affirmative. Yet the present-day market demand has a word to say. Many editors are not interested in characterization; they want story people simply to be doing something interesting, taking part in an adventure or escapade. It matters not what they think, or that the reader may be able to recognize them on the street. And some editors, who profess a desire for incidental characterization (action to be paramount), are satisfied with mere type indications such as these:

"He-man," red-blooded, courageous in the face of the most preposterous dangers, almost superhumanly strong.

SYNTHETIC CHARACTERIZATION

Flapper, nose-powdering, bob-haired young woman who uses the latest slang and has a care-free, somewhat disrespectful manner.

Business man, forceful, good judge of character, able to put through a deal under difficulties, shrewd and quick.

Ambitious woman, cunning, capable of outwitting even a level-headed man, versed in the art of flattery, persistent to a fault.

And so may be devised all the well-known general types of persons who are frequently met with in stories and movies. Individual differences that make one "he-man," flapper, or business man stand out from another of the same class are of little consequence, and it matters not that this type classification may greatly exaggerate the flesh-and-blood prototype.

However, if you are not writing the easiest story that will get by some editor, characterization is of paramount importance. What matters it, after all, about the action? It is the creation of living characters that is the magic of fiction. Shakespeare, Dickens, and all the great writers live mainly because they brought to life people whom in some cases we know much better than we know our best friends.

What a thrilling thing it is to give breath and warm blood to a man made of words! Hardy has created the simple farm folk of the English heath; Stendahl made royal persons; de Maupassant peopled a French boulevard; Thackeray has given us living replicas of everyday persons.

A good market exists for stories based upon real characterizations, although some of them will not go

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

beyond the conventional explorations of the basis of character. But good characterization requires a great deal of time and unceasing effort; perhaps the pay is not commensurate with the energy expended, but should that make any difference to him who is blessed with the ability to create life?

CHAPTER VII

FIXING THE BASIS OF ACTION

THE writer needs to pay conscious attention to the motives he attributes to the actions of his characters—more, perhaps, than to any other thing in fiction-writing. As long as characters act naturally and action follows action in a convincing manner, whatever the story may be it is almost sure to have a positive measure of interest.

And yet it seems that the average writer errs more in his handling of motives than a normal-minded person would be expected to do. I believe that the principal trouble in this case is not the moron intelligence of the author, but an easy-going or fuddled attitude toward the story that is being written. The writer is often misled into acceptance of some standard fictional motive rather than questioning the motive and determining for himself whether or not it is logical.

A common case in point, especially in loosely constructed stage plays, is the lost letter or important paper. A character receives a message of the greatest importance, then a new interest diverts the character's attention and he hastily stuffs the message in his pocket or elsewhere apparently in order that he will be certain to lose it. Think a moment. If you were similarly placed, don't you believe you would take every precaution to safeguard such a message—especially if you had

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

reason to suspect someone of trying to get it from you?

Laziness, perhaps, more than a lack of conscious application, is responsible for much loose motivation. But then, the writer needs to become aware that he is lazy; if that does not arouse his energy, and set him to work with renewed attention and application, he may as well quit writing altogether.

I suppose every writer has at some time shown his story to a critic or to a discerning friend and has been asked: "But why did your character do that?" And then the author seriously asks himself, "*Why?*" And perhaps for the first time he realizes that although he may have explained the character's action, it was not a thoughtful explanation. You are fortunate, after a fashion, if you have an ever-ready critic to do your thinking for you; it is almost as good as being an author by proxy.

Mental obscurity or mental incapacity is the only excuse for poor motivation for the writer who has had sufficient experience to enable him to write at all. Mental obscurity can be cleared up by conscious application to what is written. Of course the incapable writer, or one with an unusually limited experience in life, may not know what constitutes a logical motive for a given action. I can only say that the writer who cannot become aware of the true—or generally true—meaning behind an act would better leave fiction writing alone.

I have criticized a great many stories and have been frequently amazed at the puerile motivations of would-be authors. In some cases, it is true, the reason for

FIXING THE BASIS OF ACTION

apparently imbecile explanations of actions is so deeply grounded in the unconscious mind of the author that a psychoanalyst would be needed to bring it to his consciousness. If the writer's complexes and inhibitions are responsible for his weaknesses in writing, he can determine this to some degree by reading books on abnormal psychology and on psychonanalysis, and by comparing his stories with printed ones. If he has developed keenness of observation so as to discover native weaknesses that limit his endeavors there may be reasonable hope for his success in writing, provided that he has normal intelligence and "the smallest gifts."

However, in most cases of weak motivation, the trouble lies simply in the author's slipshod way of thinking. Coincidence, failure to co-ordinate characterization, and fallacious reasoning, are oftenest the causes of poor motivation.

In a story of his a writer tells of a young boy who sees for the first time a huge circus poster displaying a herd of performing elephants. He yearns to go to the circus and see a real live elephant, but he knows his father would not countenance the idea, let alone give him the money for such a purpose. If you were the boy in question how do you suppose you would realize your desire? It is likely, perhaps, that in the circumstances you would have to wait until you grew considerably older. But you could write to a relative or friend to come and take you. Small hope in that, if your parents objected, and in case of the poor little boy, he had no relatives except his parents, and his friends were simple working-men at a log camp miles from the town. The problem is difficult, for this author

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

wants the story to end happily. Well, there is no use in thinking too hard; the boy might find a pocketbook stuffed with bills and return it to the owner, who might reward him by prevailing upon the father to let him take the youngster to the circus. So, dear reader, the author says in effect, don't worry about your troubles; fortuitous circumstances and coincidences will solve them.

Another writer has an idea for a story. It would be interesting if a young man and a young woman, not acquainted with each other, were kidnapped and kept prisoners in a mansion where every luxury was furnished them, to see if they would mutually fall in love there. It offers possibilities. But such a scheme needs to be explained somehow, for kidnapping escapades of that kind are not performed every day for experimental purposes. Ah, he has it! The fathers of the young people want them to marry, and so this method is employed under romantic circumstances to bring them together and encourage them to fall in love.

The fathers are described as astute, level-headed business men, but to the author there was apparently no lack of co-ordination of characterization to show the two gentlemen carrying out a maniacal scheme such as the men in question would never do in real life. Motivation is attained, and there is no use to bother one's head with such baffling questions as "Why didn't the fathers introduce the young people first to see if they wouldn't fall in love anyway?" "Why didn't the fathers invite the young people to go on a yachting trip or to join a hunting party, so that they would be much thrown together in a sane manner?" "Why should the

FIXING THE BASIS OF ACTION

fathers guard against possible opposition in such a melodramatic manner when it was likely that the two young people would naturally fall in love if they were to love each other at all?"

Mystery is absolutely essential in a detective story, and another writer fuddles his mind so that he can make mystery. The coroner and the sheriff are called to a home where a man has been murdered. The manner of committing the crime is not known by these officials. A maid is forced to say something about a peculiarly shaped vase which the sheriff looks into, but he finds nothing. Mystery piles on mystery. The hero-detective is eventually called and at once all becomes clear. He finds a hatpin in the room where the crime was committed and discovers a small round wound on the dead man's body just above the heart. The hatpin had been driven into the man's heart and he was thus killed. The detective questions the maid and also elicits an unguarded comment concerning the vase, which leads him to pick it up, note that it is heavy and that it apparently has a false bottom. Within are the jewels belonging to the murdered man. The maid confesses complicity in the crime. The murderer was frightened off before he was able to steal the jewels, but she was supposed to bring them to him after the excitement calmed down. She was the only other person who knew where the jewels were hidden.

Clever solution, is it not? And readers should not ask such unnecessary questions as "Why didn't the coroner, an experienced physician and skilled in criminal cases, discover the wound above the heart?" "Why didn't the sheriff, also practiced in criminal cases, make

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

a careful search of the room and find the hatpin lying under the couch?" "Why didn't the sheriff have enough sense to test the vase for a false bottom?" "Why did the maid, who was a clever criminal, twice permit herself to make a most incriminating break?" Yes, why should they let things go as they did? But this is the author's mystery story, not the reader's.

Whatever kind of story one is writing, or whatever market he hopes to reach, it is obvious that motivation should be broadly logical. In the preceding chapter on characterization we found that two general methods obtain, according to the type of magazine, one conventional and the other unconventional. And so it is in motivation. The writer needs to become aware of both so that he can restrict or give free play to his motivation, depending upon the nature of his stories.

There is one type of editor connected with the publishing of popular family journals who has strict standards upon which all motivation should be based, just as it was shown that some editors require certain characteristics to differentiate various types of persons, as the hero, villain, business man and so on. This editor professes to believe that all good women are seraphically virtuous and all others desire to be; that heroes of stories are respecters of all woman-kind, and that they are unflinchingly courageous: therefore, heroes and heroines of stories should be motivated by these ideals. An editor of a widely read men's magazine once objected to an adventure story because it incidentally told of a woman who rouged and powdered profusely in order to inveigle the villain into a trap.

Motivation based upon such ideas is supposed to

FIXING THE BASIS OF ACTION

reveal that this is the best of all possible worlds and that men were born good and are evil only because of a temporary affliction, as a healthy man sometimes catches cold. Thus the happy ending, the goodness unchanging, and the reform of the wicked characters at the end of the tale, are properly motivated.

But sometimes a writer questions the basis for such motivation. Theodore Dreiser has been an American literary pioneer in this regard. While yet a reporter on a metropolitan daily he saw many instances of sordid misery from which honorable escape was well-nigh impossible; he came in contact with successful business men who amassed fortunes through bribery, political machinations, and underhanded schemes; he met loyal wives who loved their husbands, yet were not temperamentally compatible with them, and who resorted to accepting lovers in the futile hope of retaliating against their mates. The world that he saw did not jibe with the world as it was supposed to be in the fiction of the day; and so he decided to write of life as he had seen it, omitting nothing that he believed to be true.

The writer who thinks may well question the basis of many of the popular motivations. A red-blooded man is supposed to act with courage and unselfishness in all cases. In a typical New York crowd waiting at a local subway station, there may be supposed to be many men of this kind. Suppose that around a curve can be seen the lights of an approaching express train, gaining speed as it is about to dash past the station. A child or a woman falls from the platform upon the track. A moment only is granted to save her. How many men would face almost certain death from the

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

electrically charged third rail and the approaching train to save a person unknown to them? Perhaps fear of his own death would outweigh the thought of the life imperiled. Would any man in such a contingency be proclaimed a coward?

Men are supposed to be courteous to women—especially soldiers and cowboys. Was not Wyoming, the cowboy state, the first in the Union to vote for woman suffrage? A friend told me of an incident that he witnessed on a train. It was the Fourth of July and the train was on its way to Denver from a southern Colorado town. The coaches were filled as is usual on holidays, so in order to get a seat a number of women were forced to sit in the smoking car. Among them were white-haired women and, as a few editors would sentimentally declare, some persons' sweet mothers.

The cowpunchers in the smoker were having a jolly time and were celebrating in the red-blooded American way with firecrackers of the loud-noise variety. The fun became intensified as they began throwing firecrackers about the coach, making the passengers jump with fear. In a rear seat were sitting two officers of the United States Army, enjoying the hilarity. The cowboys now concentrated their attention on the timid people in the car in order to get a bigger "kick" out of their fun. Many firecrackers began bursting around the white-haired mothers. They appealed to the conductor, but he measured the six feet of muscle of the nearest cowboy, thought of his own rotund softness, then winked at the grinning men of the range and went out of the car smiling. The army officers smoked and laughed. The fun continued. My friend boiled with

FIXING THE BASIS OF ACTION

impotent anger. He resented the actions of the men in the car ; he is not an outdoor man, and is small and frail. He hid his head in shame. What could he try to do? He had not even a better seat to offer the women.

These examples must make clear to the reader that type motivations do not always hold good in life. Cowboys, sailors, business men, all are only men in various occupations, and they are motivated by whatever has motivated men from the time that they lifted their heads from the dirt and began walking erect. Men may be swayed by lofty aims one day, and the very next day be caught in an atavistic relapse: just as a country may one day be an exponent of peace at any price, and the following day become lustful for the blood and utter destruction of an enemy.

If you are eager to write stories that are reflective of the life about you, life as it exists, do not blind yourself to the complexity of motives that guide the actions of men. The most honorable man may at some time resort to crime; the purest woman, impelled by love, may become an adultress; the Bolshevik, the Radical, the Socialist, may be suffering from a vicious propaganda, though they are really trying to force upon a stubborn world what is best for it; school-teachers, ministers, senators, philanthropists, may be malignantly distorting the whole truth or presenting only one phase to further some general selfish economic scheme. I am not saying whether any of these stand for what is true—it is of no consequence here—but I am saying that men are men, no matter what their professions or positions may be. And they are all motivated, according to

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

their heritage and their education, by whatever has motivated every man since the day of his creation.

This chapter has dealt so far with the motivation of a character's actions. A larger motivation exists in fiction, that of incident. The conscious observer has learned that one thing happens because something preceding it took place. Joseph Conrad in his excellent short-story, "Youth," tells of the trials of an old freight ship sailing for Bangkok. The boat springs several leaks and the cargo of coal in the hold gets wet; because of the wetting, the coal is set afire by spontaneous combustion, and eventually the fire forces the men to leave the ship. Result succeeds cause; and so it is in the larger movements of life.

Victor Hugo and Thomas Hardy use exceeding care in establishing the motives for action, thus giving to their novels the feeling of the inexorable movement of life itself. A single phase from Hugo's "*L'Homme Qui Rit*" will illustrate:

Barkilphedro, by subtle means, gets Queen Anne to appoint him Clerk to the Admiralty; because he secures this position, he is the one who receives a bottle washed ashore from the sea containing information to show that Gwynplaine is really the Duke of Clancharlie; because he has this information, he is able to gain his revenge against Duchess Josina, for she will have to give up her lands and castles to Gwynplaine, the rightful heir.

Back of this episode is a still more complex motivation which has made it possible. Ursus, the Philosopher, saves the boy Gwynplaine; because he does this the boy finds a place in his foster-father's troupe as

FIXING THE BASIS OF ACTION

comedian; because his face was distorted into a comic grin he makes a great success as a mountebank; because of this success he is brought to London, and because he is brought there Barkilphedro is able to find him. Barkilphedro's part in the drama is also carefully accounted for by relating what causes him to hate the Duchess and how circumstances make it possible for him to plan and execute his revenge against her. Thus Barkilphedro is the agent which unites the two threads of the story which from the very first had been converging with the inevitability of fate.

In a short-story, motivation of incident seldom needs to be so complex as this, but if the author is aware of the process by which he brings characters together and relates action with action, he will not fall into the slough of coincidence or faulty reasoning.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FINAL PUNCH

LIFE is a subtle force that now and then flares up like a blaze in a dark night, revealing some inner meaning. Man becomes inured to everyday phenomena; the mighty spectacle of a star-filled sky excites no wonder. But man in his great restlessness is ever seeking change, the startling, the unexpected. Ordinary men seek sensation in the various cheap sensational offerings of today; cultivated men look for the flash in the dark that affords the more profound, electric sensation.

This lure of the unexpected finds two similar expressions in fiction-writing. In both cases it is a little more than a device, something more vital to the theme than mere mechanics. The writer should become thoroughly conscious of its value, its application, and its power.

The lure of the unexpected is known in writing under various names: surprise, "kick," novelty, dynamic conclusion, punch. The application of punch to short-story endings was popularized by O. Henry, who employed the trick twist much in the manner of a magician who first convinces his audience that the silk hat is empty and then takes from it a rabbit, a hen, ribbons, and what not.

That is one phase of the punch ending, the most mechanical; it can be fitted on to any cleverly worked-

THE FINAL PUNCH

out story. But punch finds expression in more than this device; it may be said to be that force, expressed through description, dialogue, or action, which surprises or arouses the reader. It is opposed to the tranquil ending, or to any ending after which the reader may say, as following the solution of a geometrical problem, *Quod erat demonstrandum*.

Punch is not something restricted to the ending. It is a desirable quality throughout the narrative. It may be produced by queerly turned phrases, by incongruous figuration, by unique style, by unexpected incidents, by unusual characterization and dialogue.

In this book, however, only the final punch is to be considered. At this point it is most effectively used, for it heightens the total impression of the story. It intensifies the emotion aroused or increases the feeling of enjoyment. By becoming aware of its power in this instance you should have no trouble realizing the value of punch elsewhere. This chapter, as the others, gives you an intensive study of an important phase of writing. What it will mean to you depends upon what you can bring to it. The "final punch" is up to you.

The popularity of epigrams, jokes, proverbs, and verses that depend largely for their effect upon the final lines, reveals the charm of final punch. Note the effect of the postscript in this excellent example of final punch taken from Dreiser's "The 'Genius.'"

"Dear Eugene: I got your note several weeks ago, but I couldn't bring myself to answer it before this. I know everything is over between us and that is all right I suppose. It has to be. You couldn't love any woman

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

long, I think. I know what you say about having to go to New York to broaden your field is true. You ought to, but I'm sorry you didn't come out. I have cared, but I'll get over that, I know, and I won't ever think hard of you.—Ruby.”

“I stood by the window last night and looked out in the street. The moon was shining and those dead trees were waving in the wind. I saw the moon on that pool of water over in the field. It looked like silver. Oh, Eugene, I wish I were dead.”

Punch endings are secured by three general methods. They may be classified as:

Endings contrary to desire.

Peculiar revelations—of character, idea, etc.

Trick endings.

The ending contrary to desire nearly always involves unhappy features. It usually deals with a study of character. The reader's interest is aroused in a character who is striving to overcome some obstacle or to attain some goal. If the author makes it appear that success is coming and leads his readers urgently to want that success, failure comes as a distinct shock.

John Dos Passos developed an effective ending of this sort in his powerful novel, “The Three Soldiers.” Toward the last of the book John Andrews is shown apparently secure in his freedom after having deserted from the army in order to write music and escape from an unbearable environment. The sympathetic reader hopes that Andrews will never be taken. The last page shows Andrews arrested by the military police.

THE FINAL PUNCH

This ending has punch. Its influence is felt long after the book is laid aside; there is in it a tragedy deeper than death.

Another form of ending contrary to desire is one that simply leaves the situation unchanged. This ending is common to many of the modern realistic stories. Readers have been so "fed up" on stories of the "and-they-lived-happily-ever-after" type that they have come to expect a similar solution to every problem. A well-developed story of realism which shows that a desired change in the relations or destinies of the characters is improbable achieves a decided punch.

This kind of ending is satisfactorily employed by Michael Gold in his story, "The Password to Thought—to Culture" (*Liberator*). The story is of David Brandt, a factory worker, who yearns for a more enlightened environment. His surroundings are oppressive and there is little hope for escape. The final paragraphs are:

"Go out; put on your hat and coat and go!"

"But I want to read!"

"You won't! I won't let you. I should drop dead if I let you!"

"David stared wrathfully at her for a moment, stung into anger by her presumptuous meddling into affairs beyond her world of illiteracy and hope. He was about to speak sharply to her, but changed his mind with a weary shrug of his shoulders. He put on his hat and coat and wandered aimlessly into the East Side night, not in obedience to his mother, but because it was

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

easier than to sit here under the impending flow of her nightly exhortations."

Stories of character, mood or idea often gain an added effect or punch following the climax by a new revelation of character or idea that seems to illuminate or emphasize that which has gone before. Such a revelation has dynamic force, for it hammers home a final impression by contrast, repetition, or similar device. It often has no essential relationship to the climax. It is like a punch in the stomach after the knockout uppercut has been struck.

J. D. Beresford employed this type of ending for a peculiar story, "Powers of the Air" (*The Seven Arts*). He tells about a unique character who warns a young man not to go to the cliffs in a storm because of the mysterious powers of the air. But despite his pleadings the young man goes, and he waits, almost eagerly, to witness the tragic proof of his warnings. But the young man returns and on his boyish face is an expression of triumph and superiority. The final paragraphs are:

"He stood in the doorway, braced by his struggle with the wind; and his young eyes were glowing with the consciousness of discovery and new knowledge.

"Yet he cannot deny that I showed him the way."

Trick endings are those brought about by a conscious attempt on the part of the author to lead the reader to expect a certain ending entirely different from that which is actually employed. This may be accomplished

THE FINAL PUNCH

in various ways, but in general, trick-ending stories are of three kinds.

Unexpected explanation of an event. The formula is: A series of events to some extent familiar to the reader, suddenly revealed as having an entirely unexpected significance. An excellent example is "The Great Cipher," by Melville Davisson Post (*The Red Book*). The narrator tells of a diary kept by an explorer who died in an African jungle. Apparently the writer was demented. He told of human creatures with invisible bodies, of a strange malady, of pygmy savages. At the last the narrator reveals that the diary is not an actual account of a trip, but a cipher message accusing the two white men accompanying the explorer of a plan to murder him.

Concealing intended solution behind an apparently limited choice of actions. The formula for this type is a situation presenting two or more possible courses of action which are kept prominently before the reader, whereas the intended outcome is held in the background, to be "sprung" at the close of the story. Many detective stories follow a formula similar to this, leading the reader to believe that the guilt lies between certain characters who are under suspicion, but finally fixing it upon another character who was apparently not connected with the crime. "The Obligations of Win Foo," by Robert E. Hewcs (*Brief Stories*), prepares thus for such an ending. Win Foo is hired by each of two business rivals to kill the other. Of course they do not know of Win's double employment. Win Foo puzzles long over which duty he should fulfill, and seeks

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

the aid of sages. He finally solves the problem unexpectedly in his own way by killing *both* men.

A contrasting final incident. This type is one of the most interesting and follows this plan: An initial incident is developed which leads the reader to expect a certain course of action. In the final incident the leading character does something directly opposite.

"Conscience," a short-story by Phillip E. Stevenson (*Brief Stories*), has a clever ending of this type. Watson is revealed as a man of conscience. A friend comes to his office and breaks the news that Watson's wife has run away with another man. Watson is evidently greatly shocked, beaten. The friend is afraid he will commit suicide, but Watson hurries him off. Then he grabs the telephone and calls a number. He tells the woman at the other end of the wire that his wife has left him. His conscience is clear now. They can go away together.

Although trick-ending stories are in a measure mechanical, the final punch is not something tacked on, but, as has been seen, is a result of careful and skillful planning, to lead up to the punch at the end.

The author must understand the character of his story and write a punch ending only because it is a logical development, not merely because it is sometimes an effective device.

The final punch is an artistic achievement, and authors should not permit it to degenerate into anything less than that. It should be plain and poignant. It impresses, for it is a flash of light in the dark. Often it is a brief summary of a human experience.

CHAPTER IX

WRITING THE STORY

ACQUIRING technique is, after all, not the writer's most important task; for, once he has become aware of the general technical structure of the short-story, he should let it repose in his foreconscious mind. It is no longer a matter of importance to the author, and the less it obtrudes itself the better is his work likely to be, no matter for what market he may be writing.

The principal thing while writing your story is to be vitally interested in it. It is almost impossible to have a story flow spontaneously and attractively unless you feel some definite part of what you write. You may get an idea which appeals to you as a good one for a story—a person you chance to meet may seem an unusual fiction prototype, or an incident from real life may perhaps be a story itself; but of what fiction value to you are these things unless they have gripped your interest and you feel an urge to write about them?

The point from which the author should begin his story may well be the particular phase of the narrative that most interests him. It may be a character, a setting, the expounding of an idea, or merely an incident. Begin from this one point and work out your story. Whether the story will be unusual or commonplace depends upon your ability, how much you have

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

learned about the craftsmanship of writing, and upon the extent of your conscious development.

We can take a setting and show how two authors of different qualifications might develop a story from it. The setting is an isolated railroad station situated in the Rocky Mountains, miles from a town.

One author may be interested in the mood of loneliness which the station awakens. The hills of stone towering above the little wooden structure, the unbroken silence, gnarled pine trees made restless by unceasing winds—these all affect him; and as night falls a dark blanket is dropped over all. The little station seems to draw itself closer together about the yellow light over the stationmaster's desk. But as yet we have no story, no situation. The story will be simple, but we are presenting a phase of life that we hope will be in some measure illuminative of life itself.

We need here the human element; and for our situation is needed the grouping together of antagonistic elements. The stationmaster feels the intense loneliness of his position. How can he overcome this feeling?

The man has heard that some of the isolated mountain stations have been robbed of their meager valuables. The robbers are still at large and are supposed to be in his vicinity. As night advances the loneliness becomes more intense. The weather is cloudy and cold, the wind increases, noises sound, the more startling for the silence in the vast reaches of the mountains. The lonely man has no one to talk to. He listlessly toys with his work. He dreams of past days with friends, of his boyish ambition to be a fireman, a pirate—always

WRITING THE STORY

of something calling for action. Perhaps tonight the robbers will attack him. The passenger train soon due is carrying much valuable express, he has learned. Maybe the robbers will try to hold it up. The stationmaster takes out his gun and examines it; he is almost happy in the hope of some action that may make it necessary. He must throw the switch to let the train go by as it does not stop tonight at his station. He opens the door, revolver and lantern in hand. Pitch dark. The wind has died down again. The toot of the approaching engine sounds like a wail. The feeble light of the man's lantern shines on his weapon and casts a faint gleam upon the steel rails. Nothing seems very real except the darkness and his loneliness. He goes out and throws the switch and starts back for the station, suddenly reminded that no robbers had molested him. No one is in the little building. The long express train sweeps past with a stream of blurry lights. Sounds, growing fainter and fainter. Then deep silence again. Lord, the gnawing loneliness of the place!

And so the story ends. It could be made a gripping, tense thing; yet there is almost no action, such action as editors of the general magazines require. A mood is built up which clearly reveals the stationmaster's feelings and suggests his character. On the other hand the same setting could be used as a starting point for a plot story.

As the stationmaster goes to throw the switch outside his lonely station he is commanded to hold up his hands. Three armed and masked men face him and he is commanded to keep away from the switch. Unless he can

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

outwit the robbers the train will be derailed as it is forced to make an unexpected sharp turn onto the spur track. "Drop your gat and keep your hands up," commands one of the masked men.

The stationmaster acts quickly ; dropping his lantern, he gets his gun into play. He gains an advantage, but a bullet shot into his leg brings him down. From the distance sounds the whistle of the oncoming train. The stationmaster crawls on his belly, army-fashion, toward the switch. He has his key ready to unfasten the lock. Just at the switch he engages in a hand-to-hand combat with a robber he had wounded slightly. The time to save the train narrows to seconds. A quick blow, recovery of his pistol in time, and the switch is thrown. The train dashes safely by the station and the stationmaster takes stock of his prisoners.

Here the principal purpose was to crowd as much action as was logical into the development. The story is definitely fashioned to meet a certain market requirement. The narrative begins with action and a dilemma, moving swiftly to a crisis, the stationmaster's injury. But this leads to a new action in which the hero continues to try to solve his problem. Then the last struggle, accomplishment of purpose, and we have a thrilling climax—just in time! There is considerable suspense, but no provision is made for characterization or description except as incidental to the action.

The two developments outlined in the foregoing paragraphs are not intended to present an abysmal contrast. In fact, the two types may merge so that there will be but little difference in their literary value. The action story may be as finished a work of art as may

WRITING THE STORY

any other kind; it is only when a story is mechanically devised, deprived of all possible beauty by complete neglect of characterization, style and description, and when from it is meticulously removed every thought that may run counter to some popular or editorial conviction, that it becomes a mere literary concoction. A story which is flagrantly radical, on the other hand, does not indicate literary merit.

“Grammar, rhetoric, metrics, technique—these have been the indispensable tools of our writers. They still are. But having acquired them our writers find they can fashion nothing beautiful, nothing lasting, nothing that will weather the storms of time. For no tools can accomplish the feat of fashioning something out of nothing.” This statement of N. Bryllion Fagin’s (“Short-Story Writing”) is true, but the writer who is able to devise any story that is good enough to be printed is not fashioning something out of nothing even though he has little more to work with than “the indispensable tools” and his imagination. It is also true that many a writer has no desire to create fiction that will “weather the storms of time,” and there is no reason why he should have such a desire if he has had the matter out with himself and has clearly decided upon the course he is to follow.

In writing a story, however, give the best you have. Be prepared for your task by having mastered the technique of your medium and by keeping a clear mind. Try to feel what you write, laugh and suffer and curse and love with your characters. Setting, characters and incidents of any kind have an emotional context, or the observer reads one into them. The extent to which you

CONSCIOUS SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

can make your descriptions vivid and compelling depends upon the degree in which you feel the emotional essence of the thing you are writing about. And the more conscious your personal development is, the better able you will be to distinguish between sentimentalism and a deeper emotion, between the specious and the real—and the more will your writing gain thereby.

Style need not be a matter of conscious effort, for the real meaning of style was most aptly put by the French naturalist, Buffon, who said, "Style is the man himself." Whatever you are will be reflected in your writing. However, it is best to become aware of crudities and solecisms, grammar, metrics, rhetoric, etc., which you can smooth out in your polishing or revision after the initial composition is completed.

Another matter that concerns some writers while fashioning a story is what they shall prove by the story or, what moral principle they shall expound. The best writers are not concerned with didactics or propaganda. The most satisfactory story is a depiction of a bit of life, and if that fragment happens to illustrate some larger principle of ethics or dogmatics, well and good. Still, it is well that the writer who is preparing himself to attain publication as quickly and easily as possible should know that many magazines want such stories as set out to prove that virtue is rewarded, that evil is punished, and that existing American systems of education, politics, and economics are the best yet developed.

The writer who will produce the finest work, however, is one who will work free from artificial restraints, prejudices, or dogmatic requirements. He is

WRITING THE STORY

the writer who will try to become thoroughly aware, intellectually and emotionally, of the forces of life, both of thought and action, with which he comes in contact, so that he may be able to record them faithfully and with understanding.

Mark Twain, in his preface to "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," has suggested the proper limitations of fiction-writing, and also the sensible way of reading stories :

"Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted, persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished, persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.

"BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR."

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